



Alternative Medicine in Germany

by Anna Kassnel

Most people don't know much about natural healing until they turn to it when conventional medicine fails. In Germany there is an officially recognized profession of "natural healing", the so-called Natural Healing Practitioner or Heilpraktiker (HP). Somewhat surprisingly, it was not until 1939 that a law on natural healing was enacted. Before that, Germany allowed anyone to practise their own system. This led to an open market for quacks and other charlatans with considerable abuse of an ignorant populace. The problem was finally addressed with the HP law in 1939, where admission to the profession was regulated, and limits to what could be practised were defined by general regulations, both for natural healers and for practitioners in the public health system.

Today, the training in natural healing takes about 2-3 years, depending on the institution, and it is not funded by the state. Usually, the education consists of individual training modules with the actual programme chosen according to individual preference, either as full-time study, intensive course, evening classes and/or weekend training. In addition to basic medical knowledge in subjects such as physiology and pathology, the study programme focuses on physical examination and diagnostic methods and is part of a core curriculum which is tested by exam. More specific techniques are optional, although students tend to choose one or more (see below). Most training stresses practical experience with the various techniques. Certification requires the completion of a state examination (held twice yearly).

The HP, like an MD, follows the basic principles of "do no harm" and, of course, "who heals is right". However, because natural healing is done on an individual basis and is by its very nature holistic, i.e. frequently involves a combination of methods, it is not amenable to testing by controlled, clinical trials. Evidence for its efficacy is primarily anecdotal and such evidence is often not accepted by the scientific establishment. Nevertheless, certain aspects, especially the emphasis on a healthy lifestyle and proper nutrition, are shared with evidence-based medicine.

As most health insurance schemes do not support "unscientific" treatments and only a few selected "natural treatments" are recognized, patients do not usually receive reimbursement for treatment by an HP. As one can imagine, an HP therefore needs a very good reputation to maintain a viable practice. Since advertising is strictly regulated (for example, announcements in local newspapers are allowed only when a new practice is opened and then only for 5 consecutive issues or different newspapers/magazines), many HPs give local educational presentations on natural healing topics.

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Some of the more commonly encountered forms of natural healing in Germany include:

Homoeopathy: Developed by Samuel Hahnemann (born 1755 in Meißen/Germany). Based on the premise that the symptoms of a disease are a manifestation of the body's natural defenses. By treating a disease with vanishingly small amounts of a substance that in healthy people produces symptoms similar to those of the disease being treated, it seeks to stimulate the body's natural immune system. Somewhat paradoxically, remedies gain potency by dilution. This system gained notoriety in the late 1980s when a French researcher, Jacques Benveniste (INSERM 200 Institute, Paris), attempted to publish "scientific" tests of the principles in the journal "Nature". Practitioners claim that homoeopathic remedies don't have any side effects; sceptics claim that this is because there is nothing in them.

Kinesiology: The so-called "science of movement". "Applied kinesiology" was founded in 1964 by the American chiropractor, George Goodheart, and uses "manual muscle testing" to find imbalances, tension, and blockage in the body. The kinesiologist then rebalances the nervous system, finally retesting to verify that a change has taken place.

Phytotherapy: A very ancient method of healing (also used by some ape species) and not different in principle from the pharmaceutical industry. It uses plants and plant extracts for healing and alleviation of symptoms.

Acupuncture: A method originating in China where needles (with applied heat or electrical stimulation) are inserted at very precise points to encourage the body to promote natural healing and improve functioning.

Bach flower remedies: A system developed by Dr. Edward Bach in the 1930s in the UK. Although, with its very small amounts of active ingredients, it is superficially similar to homoeopathy, the basic philosophy and method of preparation are very different in that Bach flowers are given according to emotions and personality types determined by the practitioner.

Reflexology: 'Reflex' zones are skin areas that direct an impulse (as in massage) to certain organs in the body. Foot reflexology is the most common technique used.

Iris diagnosis: A diagnostic procedure used to elucidate the complex of reasons for an illness based on the idea that each organ or part of the body during illness is reflected in a certain part of the iris – the so-called projection field (sector).

Regular subject-specific training and refresher courses are mandatory for the HP and start during the educational period. Continued updates are also possible through national HP congresses every year, where information and treatment experiences are shared and the latest products and therapy tools are presented. In addition, there are many smaller, organized symposia where individual subjects are presented both for HPs and other health professionals. Sharing of information between the HP and established medical communities is increasing and suggests that the two can learn from each other to improve the health of the population.

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